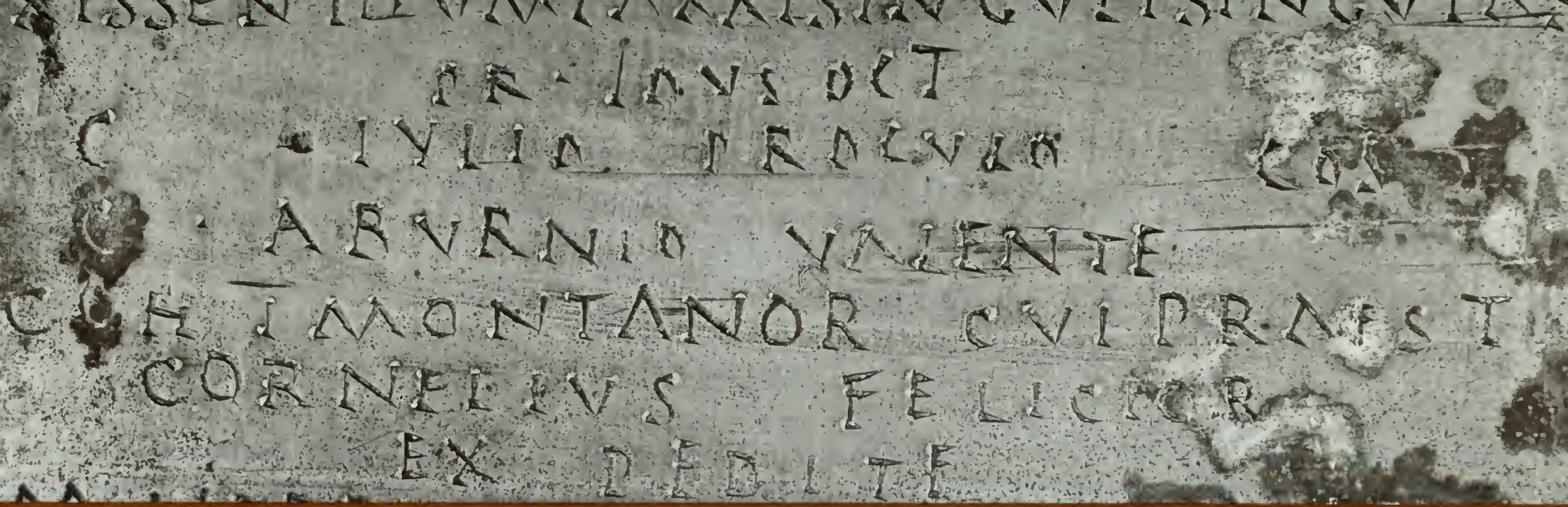

Two Ancient Roman Plates

Bronze Military Diplomas and Other Sealed Documents

Gallery Guide

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Written documentation was just as important in ancient civilizations as written contracts and deeds are today. The Romans, Greeks, Israelites, Egyptians, and other peoples took great care to document legal or civic events and to preserve important records. This exhibition features an extraordinary set of Roman military plates from AD 109. Bronze plates such as these, known as military diplomas, were used for granting Roman citizenship and military honors to soldiers retiring after twenty-five years of service. The information in this gallery guide is designed to enhance your visit. An extensive collection of research sources and further materials relevant to the exhibition can be found at byustudies.byu.edu.

Roman Military Diplomas

These two plates were issued by imperial decree on October 14, AD 109, during the rule of emperor Trajan in Rome [fig. 1]. The text on the plates announces the grant of military honors and citizenship rights to retiring soldiers who served in nineteen units of the Roman army. The text then specifically grants those honors and rights to the soldier Marcus Herennius Polymita and his family. Each qualifying, retiring soldier included in the cohorts listed would have been given his own personalized set of plates. In the first century, no civic status was more powerful than that of Roman citizenship, a privilege enjoyed by a small percent of the empire's population at the time of Trajan.

These two plates were designed to be bound together. They are the same size, and after almost two thousand years of contact, they conform to each other in shape and surface features. The full text of the imperial decree is cast in portrait format on the front of plate 1 (side A). The very same text is inscribed in landscape format on the back of plate 1 (side B) and over onto the front of plate 2 (side C). On the back of plate 2 (side D) are cast the names of the seven witnesses or officials under whose authority these plates were issued. When the two plates are stacked and bound together, sides A and D become the two exterior faces of the sealed pair, and sides B and C become the protected interior faces.

[FIG. 1] Diploma of Marcus Herennius Polymitas, October 14, AD 109

The text on the outside face of plate 1 (side A) was an imperial decree or grant. This particular diploma granted citizenship to soldiers from all over the empire retiring after the conquest of Dacia. Another plate with the same text was publicly posted on a temple wall in Rome, represented by the marble slab on the exhibition wall. Because so many soldiers were given citizenship under one decree, the plate posted in Rome was likely accompanied by a single list of names of the retiring individual soldiers.

Emperor Trajan

Trajan was emperor of Rome from AD 98 to 117. He is known mostly for his impressive military career, during which he conquered King Decebalus of Dacia in two military campaigns. His victory over Dacia extended the Roman Empire to its largest-ever geographic size. Trajan is also remembered for his correspondence with Pliny the Younger, which resulted in peaceable treatment of the Christians in the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus, south of the Black Sea. Trajan's conquering spirit, coupled with his diplomacy, caused him to issue a high number of military diplomas as systematic rewards for his large and diverse army.

In AD 113, a massive column was erected in Rome to celebrate Trajan's impressive rule and military success. This 120-foot monument to Emperor Trajan dominated the north end of Trajan's Forum. The column still stands today atop a massive rectangular base and has a statue of Trajan on top. The spiraled frieze (656 feet) depicts in detail scenes from the two Dacian wars won by Trajan (see frieze below). In addition to showing the Dacian battles, its scenes cover all aspects of Roman military life — including food, building projects, marches, foreign lands, and award ceremonies. The plates in this exhibition were discovered near Dacia (roughly modern-day Romania) in 1986. From the text we learn that the ancient owner of the plates fought in Trajan's Dacian military campaigns.

Writing on Metal and Other Roman Metal Objects

The exhibition also features a number of bronze and silver coins and other fine examples of Roman metallurgy from the first and second centuries AD. These objects display corrosion (rust and color variation) similar to that of the Roman diplomas. The small, silver denarius was a common Roman coin and was worth a day's wages for an unskilled laborer [fig. 2]. In the New Testament, the Good Samaritan gave two denarii to the innkeeper (Luke 10:35), and Jesus used such a coin when he told the chief priests and scribes to "render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). Another coin featured in the first case is a very rare hammered coin called a *proto contorniate*, from the time of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180). Such coins arose when a new emperor came to rule. As soon as coins of the new emperor became available, each military legion would hammer one down around the edges, creating a distinct rim on the coin, and mount it in their military standard to display the emperor's portrait and show their loyalty to their new ruler. Other coins in this case are bronze and gilded coins of Trajan ranging from about AD 101 to 117.

[FIG. 2] A Vespasian denarius, AD 69–79

In addition to coins, other metal objects from the first and second centuries AD demonstrate the advanced skills and abilities of Roman metallurgists. Some of these artifacts relate to activities of the Roman military, similar artifacts were used in the crucifixion of Christ: a lead scourge ball (attached to the whips the soldiers used), a copper nail (driven through Christ's palms, wrists, and feet), a copper spearhead (to pierce Christ's side), and a set of dice (as the soldiers cast lots over Christ's raiment) [fig. 3]. Other metal objects on display come from everyday Roman life. They offer fine examples of Roman metalwork: two copper belt buckles, a thumb thimble, a wire bracelet, an ink well, and a bronze cabinet lock and key set.

[FIG. 3] Bronze Roman objects, first and second centuries AD

Writing on Metal and Other Ancient Sealed Documents

Several legal systems in the ancient world used doubled (duplicated) documents to back up and to preserve important texts. Doubled, sealed, witnessed documents are found written in Akkadian (by the Babylonians), Hebrew (Israelites), and Greek and Latin (Greeks and Romans), on clay tablets, papyrus and parchment scrolls, wooden tablets, and metal plates.

The Babylonians, as early as 2000 BC, used such a system in writing legal contracts, deeds, and business transactions. Scribes wrote up the transactions in cuneiform on clay tablets, many of which are still legible. Witnesses would roll a personal seal onto the wet clay of a document before it dried. The tablet was then wrapped in an "envelope" formed by a thin sheet of clay with the text repeated on the outside clay as well. Finally, the witnesses impressed their seals on the outer portion. Only a judge or authorized party could at a later time legally remove the outer portion. This practice made forgery or alteration virtually impossible, because multiple witnesses were involved

and because both tablets had to dry together to prevent the outer envelope from cracking.

[FIG. 4] Lead seal impression of Constantine AD 320–330

Greek parchments found during the excavation of the fourth century BC Syrian city Dura-Europos evidence the practice of doubled legal documents written on leather. Similarly, the Israelites recorded legal documents on papyrus scrolls that were then rolled tightly and sealed, with the text being repeated on an open portion of the scroll. Jewish texts prescribe in detail the way in which doubled, sealed, witnessed documents should be configured in order to qualify as valid legal records. Talmudic law required three witnesses to make the document indisputable. In the case of dispute over the contents of the contract, a judge could break the seals and unroll the original document. Evidence of this practice is found in Jeremiah 32:6–16, a text that was not clearly understood until examples of such Hebrew texts were discovered at Elephantine. A papyrus scroll has been replicated and is displayed in the exhibition, along with authentic clay seals and metal seal boxes used to protect the seals attached to papyrus or parchment scrolls.

The exhibition displays some fine examples of ring seals and the lead and clay impressions made from such rings [fig. 4]. These were used in authorizing or validating documents in many ancient cultures. The seals of Constantine, Marcus Aurelius, and Trajan exemplify those used by witnesses of Roman plates for over three centuries. On display are also a number of small fragments of other Roman bronze plates from the second century AD. A Greco-Roman provincial lead mina weight shows another use of metal with writing on it. The lead Jewish prayer scroll is from fourth century BC Israel, predating the Roman artifacts. It is inscribed with multiple lines of Aramaic Hebrew script on both sides. Two silver scrolls and one gold scroll from the eastern Mediterranean further illustrate the ancient practice of writing on metal [fig. 5].

[FIG. 5] Small gold Greek plate or scroll

Metallurgical Analyses of These Plates

The two Roman plates are made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. The bronze used to make this military diploma is heterogeneous in texture and composition. In contrast to modern bronze, lead inclusions are common in ancient bronze, which manifests a considerable range in copper and tin. Lead isotopic compositions in the two Roman plates are the same as those of copper coins produced during the imperial era of Augustus and Tiberius. Metallurgy indicates that the Romans may have mixed ore from Sardinia with ore from southeast Spain.[2]

Making the Plates

The Romans used two different metal-writing techniques in making these plates. Sides A and D were cast before sides B and C were inscribed. The letters on the outer faces (A and D) of the plates were cast through the lost wax mold-and-casting process. Then the words on the interior faces of the plates were inscribed with a hammer and chisel, after which the plates were sealed and bound together to prevent tampering.

The two plates are each 4.8 inches (12.2 cm) by 6.4 inches (16.2 cm). Each plate is 1 to 1.1 millimeter thick, about the thickness of thin cardboard, and weighs about 2.5 ounces (70 grams). A replica set of plates is also on display for visitors to handle. The replicas in the exhibition were created in a studio in Salt Lake County, using a single mold-and-casting process. Although accurate in dimension and detail, the replica plates weigh about 11.5 ounces each (325 grams)—four and a half times as much as the ancient bronze plates.

What Significance Do the Plates Have for Latter-day Saints?

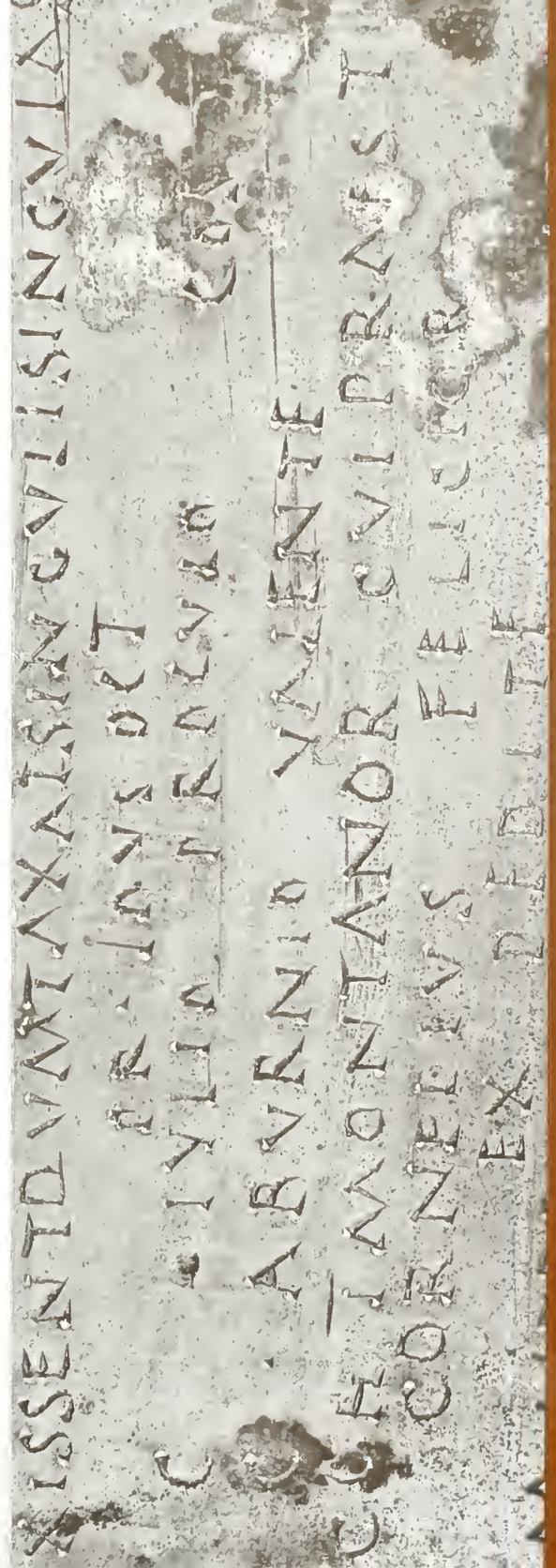
Beyond the fact that these plates offer one of the world's finest examples of ancient writing on metal plates, several specific physical similarities evoke comparisons between these Roman bronze plates and the gold plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon: their comparable size and thickness, use of alloyed metal and binding rings, with one part open and the other part sealed.[3] The combination of these factors make these doubled, sealed, and witnessed Roman plates from the second-century AD relevant to the fourth-century AD Book of Mormon plates described long before in 2 Nephi 27. As recent discoveries now show, this pattern of documentary preservation, implemented in various media, was widely recognized in several ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations.

Notes

1. This topic is covered in depth in John W. Welch, "Doubled, Sealed, Witnessed Documents: From the Ancient World to the Book of Mormon," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 391–444.

2. For in-depth information, see Michael Dorais and Garrett Hart, "A Metallurgical Study of the Marcus Herrenius Military Diploma," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 77–87.

3. For a more detailed comparison, see John W. Welch and Kelsey D. Lambert, "Two Ancient Roman Plates," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 71–73.



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